

# CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS AS A SYMPHONY OF INTERFAITH IN ĀTMĀNUTĀPAM OF ST CHAVARA

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**Abstract:** This article is an attempt to reflect on the interfaith consciousness of St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, by making an Indian reading of his classical work *Ātmānutāpam*, specifically focusing on how the incarnation of Christ is presented and celebrated with an open and inclusive approach. In *Ātmānutāpam*, while explaining the episode of the Infancy Narrative, St Chavara addresses Child Jesus with the significant Indian name, *Brahmanāthan*, and Jesus is being worshipped by *Brahmacāriṇis* with unique Indian offerings. The addition of an Indian character called Śānti as an aged shepherdess making conversation with Mother Mary makes the narrative Indian. Because of his deep and affective knowledge of Indian culture and religion, and having a moving openness and a dialogical approach to them, St. Chavara could develop a relevant cultural modification of his faith, which will have its unique stamp in the Indian Christian Theology.

**Keywords:** *Ātmānutāpam*, *Brahmacāriṇis*, *Brahmanāthan*, *Dhyānasallāpaṅgal*, Inculturation, *Kaliyugam*, *Pūjā-dravyas*, *R̥ṣis*, *Sanyāsānurūpaṇam*, *Śānti*, *Śravaṇam*, *Tiru-vedam*, *Veda-nādhn*.

## 1. Introduction

St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who founded a Sanskrit school, and learnt Sanskrit together with other students, indeed, in that process of learning this classical language, imbibed the spiritual essence of the ancient *r̥ṣis* for himself through *śravaṇa*, *manana* and *nididhyāsana* in order to effectively proclaim the message of Gospel to the soul of India. That is why, in *Ātmānutāpam*, the *Compunction of the Soul*, the Infancy Narrative is presented as a

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symphony of interfaith with Indian characters and plot, using poetic imagination. Child Jesus is called *Brahmanāthan* (the Lord of the Universe), and is worshipped by *Brahmacāriṇis* (virgins) with all kinds of Indian offerings. The addition an Indian character called Śānti as an aged shepherdess making conversation with Mother Mary make the story.

It is easy for one to experience the soul of other religions, provided, first he has experienced the soul of his own religion. For St Chavara, religion is not limited to rituals and ceremonies, rather, it is a spiritual realization and its sharing. *Ātmānutāpam* is a sharing of St. Chavara's Christ experience. It is a reply to the request of Sadhu Sunder Singh to the foreign missionaries, "Give us the living water in Indian cup."<sup>1</sup> Because of his deep and affective knowledge of Indian culture and religion, and having a moving openness and a dialogical approach to them, St Chavara could develop a relevant cultural modification of faith, which will have its unique stamp in the Indian Christian Theology.

The Catholic Church through its various official documents teaches us that like Jesus, who incarnated in Jewish culture and society, in our day, the Word of God has to be made incarnated in the different cultures of the world. In his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II, makes it very clear that Church is not opposed to any culture, and indeed positively, it always is open to other cultures and engages itself with them to adopt forms which are different from her own. Pope also reminds that in India particularly, it is the duty of Christians to draw from the ancient rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought.<sup>2</sup> India's willingness to listen to and the desire to explore and discover from other spiritual customs and traditions of the world is classically expressed in the great spark of Ṛgvedic mantra, "*Āno bhadrāḥ-kṛtavoyantuviśvataḥ*" ("Let noble thoughts come to us from every corners of the world"- Ṛgveda 1.89.1), and it was the great

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<sup>1</sup>Domenic Marbaniang, *Beyond the Shadows and Other Essays*, Mumbai: Domenic Marbaniang, 2014, 226.

<sup>2</sup>John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: Encyclical Letter*, Bombay: Pauline Publications, 1998, 72.

ideal of Indian *r̥ṣi*s for all times. St Chavara also had this noble attitude of openness towards other customs and traditions, especially with the Hindu tradition, and this Indian orientation was an important aspect of his spiritual consciousness. Thomas Kadankavil notes in this regard: “St Chavara is a typical embodiment of the classical Indian consciousness that would like to see universal unfolding of the divine signs and revelations.”<sup>3</sup>

This study is an attempt to reflect more on this Indian consciousness of Chavara, by making an Indian reading of his classical work, *Ātmānutāpam* specifically focusing on how the incarnation of Christ is presented and celebrated with an Indian touch by St Chavara. As the various orientations and thinking patterns of an author are invariably reflected in his works, we have a reasonable hope that, by analysing this work, we get insights on such orientations of the author. In the same way, a critical appraisal on *Ātmānutāpam* will also unfold some insights on the interfaith receptiveness of St Chavara, its author.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Kadankavil, “Uyarattile Vide: Siddhiyum Siddhanthavum,” *Chavarayachan*, ed. Jose Panthaplamthottiyil, Kottayam: Deepika Book Publications, 2004, 99.

<sup>4</sup>*Ātmānutāpam* has already been translated into English with the title “The Compunction of the Soul.” This translation however, has some limitations. As it is usual with any translated work, this text too cannot convey the true meaning of some of the terms and concepts of the original Malayalam text, which causes certain semantic problems, which are not easily solvable. To make it clearer, though, the translation has been kept as close to the original as literally and as precisely as possible, consistent with English sense and phrase, while translating certain words and concepts from Malayalam, it has miserably lost the original Indian sense. For example, by translating terms like ‘*kali-yugam*,’ ‘*veda-nāthan*,’ ‘*pāda-paṅgajam*,’ ‘*tṛkkannu*,’ etc., into ‘ages-back,’ ‘Lord of the Gospel,’ ‘leg,’ ‘darling-eyes,’ respectively, they have lost their Indian nuances completely, which the original Malayalam terms beautifully conveyed. For this reason, to better appreciate the Indian implications of *Ātmānutāpam*, the transliterated version of the original Malayalam lines are given as footnotes wherever it is required.

## 2. Indian Name for Jesus: *Brahmanāthan*

According to *Dhyānasallāpaṅgal* (Meditation Colloquies), St Chavara had no name other than 'ente appan,' (beloved father)<sup>5</sup> to address Jesus. But in the lines of *Ātmānutāpam*, in the Infancy Narrative, we see him addressing the Child Jesus as *Brahmanāthan*, which is the most sacred Indian name of God in the Upaniṣads: "And lauded the Infant (*Brahmanāthan's* feet) with laurels honest, Lovely damsels and virgins (*Brahmacāriṇis*) avowed" (VI.29-30).<sup>6</sup>

According to the Upaniṣads, Lord Brahman (*Brahmanāthan*) is the ultimate reality behind all the diversity that exists in the universe. The word Brahman is derived from the root *Bṛh* which means 'to swell, to grow, to expand, to promote' etc. Accordingly, the word Brahman means 'the great one.' Max Muller traces it to "Word," as is evident from the name Bṛhaspati or Vācaspati, Lord of speech,<sup>7</sup> which is very meaningful and relevant in this context. This meaning of Brahman well matches with the meaning of *Logos* as it is seen in the Gospel of John, where God is understood as the incarnated Word. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). And, when that Word incarnated in human form, learning from Indian culture and thought St Chavara rightly call Him *Brahmanāthan*.

It is very moving to see how St Chavara celebrates the incarnation of Christ in the Indian milieu. By his poetic imagination, Christ is being given an Indian birth in these lines of *Ātmānutāpam*. The word incarnation is a Latin term that

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<sup>5</sup>O my father (*ente appan*), I have sinned against heaven and before You. I am not worthy to be called Your son ... My heart, however, tells me to call You by no other name than *ente appan*." Volume III, *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara (Dhyānasallāpaṅgal* or Colloquy), Mannanam: K.E.C. Publications, 1989, 17.

<sup>6</sup>*brahmacāriṇimārām* - *sundarāmika*©; *bj lar brahmanāthante pāde mālaka*©cĀjjuṅnu.

<sup>7</sup>Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, London: Allen & Unwin, 1923, 164.

literally means “the act of being made flesh.” This Latin term was used in John 1:14, which already quoted above, speaks of Jesus who “became flesh and dwelt among us.” St Chavara harmoniously identified Gospel with Indian culture and gave it an Indian flesh. Giving an Indian name to Child Jesus is a typical example of it.

St Chavara also dared to address and praise the Lord Jesus with other appropriate Indian names of God like *Swami* (Lord), *Gopālan* (cowherd), *Nandan* (beloved son), *Āṇḍavar* (Lord), etc.

The sick alone do need you, Lord (*Swami*)!

Every sorry sinner, who fled to you (VII.359-360)<sup>8</sup>

God’s just anger to stem, your accepting

The cowherd’s (*Gopalan*) role, I long to see (III. Con.31-32)<sup>9</sup>

In such prayers of longing to see Jesus as *Swami* and *Gopālan*, etc., it is the Indian heart of St Chavara that is being expressed to the readers. Again, we also see St. Chavara addressing Jesus as ‘*Nandan*’ in many places of *Ātmānutāpam*.

How comes, sweet my Lady, your son beloved (VI.39)<sup>10</sup>

*Nandan*, her son, she saw lying before her; (V.48)<sup>11</sup>

May be because of the Tamil influence, St Chavara also uses certain Dravidian title, *Āṇḍavar* to address God.

Now as decreed by the Almighty (*Āṇḍavar*)

She made the faithful dwell in Sion (X.123-124)<sup>12</sup>

St Chavara makes Mother Mary also use the title *Āṇḍavan* also to Jesus her beloved Son: *i 3;avan daivaputran nammuje snEhasutan* (The Lord, my son - XII.129). Indeed, this fact that there were the Dravidian elements in the inculturation of St Chavara should definitely be a guiding light, for those who are often concerned

<sup>8</sup> *kelpukēu@ṁrkkellj - vaidyanu - nṣyē svj mil  
ninnu;e pakkal ccErnna p; pika@sakalarkku -*

<sup>9</sup> *kṁpatte nṣkkuv; n gṁp; lan; yi nṣ  
koccuku<sup>22</sup>; yippi<sup>o</sup>anna ninne*

<sup>10</sup> *nandan* nin<sup>o</sup>e *sutan sakalEṣṣvaran sthita -*

<sup>11</sup> *nandan* *tirupputran ka<sup>3</sup>;utan purṁbh; gē*

<sup>12</sup> *i 3;avan kalpiccapul p; rppiccu sehiyṁnil*

only with the Āryan elements of Indian culture in the processes of inculturation.

### 3. The Worship by the *Brahmacāriṇis*

St Chavara was certain about the fact that the Spirit of God is present and active in Indian culture and religion, and therefore, he tried his level best to discern the Spirit and dialogue creatively with the Indian culture and its various religious expressions. The *Brahmacāriṇis* worshipping the Child Jesus is classical example of this:

Sweet-limbed damsels, the *Brahmacāriṇis* (avowed virgins), adore the *Brahmanāthan's* feet with floral wreaths (VI.29-30).<sup>13</sup>

In Indian tradition, a *Brahmachāri* is male and *Brahmacāriṇi* is female. The word 'brahmacharya' is a component of two words, 'brahma' and 'carya,' and etymologically, it means, 'acting/living/being in Brahman.' As a virtue, it has various context-driven meanings. Popularly, it means perfect continence for the unmarried, marital fidelity for the married and *brahmacharya* is essential for spiritual realization. It is not merely physical sexual control but more than that it is living in brahman with undivided attention. Such a person is on the path of realization. According to the Upaniṣadic teachings, the staunch application of the mind to the state of becoming the Brahman is the essence of celibacy.<sup>14</sup>

So *brahmacharya* means keeping the mind and heart in Brahman and to know the ultimate truth of life. A hymn in another early Upaniṣad, the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* similarly states, "Through continuous pursuit of *satya* (truthfulness), *tapas* (perseverance), *samyajñāna* (correct knowledge), and *brahmacharya* (celibacy), one attains *Ātman* (the Self).<sup>15</sup> The great epic Mahabharata also describes the objective of *brahmacharya* as knowledge of Brahman (Book Five, *Udyoga Parva*, the Book of Effort). Brahman is the end

<sup>13</sup>brahmac;ri<sup>3</sup>im; r; - sundar; - gika<sup>o</sup>; b; lar

brahman; thante p; dE m; laka<sup>o</sup>cĀ; j; unnu

<sup>14</sup>brahmabh; vE mana; c; r; - brahmacharya - para - tapa (Darṅnopaniṣad 1.13)

<sup>15</sup>satyE na labhyastapas; hyE ka ; tm; samyag; j; nE na brahmacharyE<sup>3</sup>a nityam (Mu.Up. III.1.5) See also Mu.Up. III. 2.8.9, Praśna Up. IV. 7.

to which everything is moving. Everything is flowing like a river towards the ocean of Brahman. With these Indian meanings of *brahmacarya*, when we read the lines of *Ātmānutāpam* i.e., “Sweet-limbed damsels, the *Brahmacāriṇīs*, adore the *Brahmanāthan’s* feet with floral wreaths,” we are certainly having a better awareness about the genius of St Chavara for inculturation.

In this context, it is also good to observe that while explaining the virgin birth of Jesus, Jesus is presented as the chaste son (*Brahmacāri vatsalan*), and St Joseph as a noble *Brahmacāri* (*Brahmacāri śreṣṭhan*):

The chaste son (*Brahmacāri vatsalan*), the Friend of the just  
 Conceived of a virgin in purity preserved  
 Of the purest bride of the noble celibate (*Brahmacāri śreṣṭhan*)  
 Was born and she a virgin still! (V 135)<sup>16</sup>

Here, we see St Chavara how beautifully, recognizes the positive values of Indian culture and shifts these rays of truth to the Christian wisdom. By presenting the Christ events through the similar transymbolization of the Indian concepts and religious principles, he has given a creative reinterpretation to the Gospel from an inter-religious perspective. In doing so, he has opened new avenues, to appreciate and accept the great Indian spiritual dispositions to the different areas of Christian life.

#### 4. Indian Offerings (*Pūjā-dravyas*)

According to the Gospel narration, the wise people came from the East offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Child Jesus (Matthew 2:11). What was the offering of the shepherds? While the evangelists are silent on it, see the poetic genius of St Chavara:

Little lambs some, others milk to drink  
 To the Baby Shepherd they gave  
 Fruits of trees, garlands of blossoms sweet  
 Babes in glee, tiny birdies they bring

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<sup>16</sup>*brahmac; ri vatsalan dharmmag; mi snEhitan*  
*brahmac; ri ʒrE½;han; - tannu;e patn;ratna -*  
*kannih;natva - vin; , garbhadh; ra<sup>3</sup>iy; yi*  
*kany; tvak½aya - vin; pe<sup>oo</sup>ut; n daivasuta -*

Offering these before His Sacred feet

To the Infant bright as the sun, they bow! (VI.21-28)<sup>17</sup>

It is very clear in this poetic imagination that how much St Chavara is getting influenced by the Indian offerings of sacrifice such as milk and garlands of flowers. They are neither biblical nor specifically Christian. Though flowers are used to decorate the altar also in the West, using garlands of flowers is typically an Indian practice. St Chavara found no mistake in worshipping God in an Indian way.

### 5. Śānti an Aged Shepherdess

The poetic imagination of Śānti as an aged shepherdess making conversation with Mother Mary in the sixth chapter is another beautiful example of St Chavara's Indian consciousness.

Śānti, an aged shepherdess one day

Drew to the beautiful Mother's feet and said (VI 37-38).

The wondrous tidings, spread and day after day

Śānti and her kinsmen came, the Lord to adore (VI 263-264).

In this land of *śānti-mantras* (peace prayers), the giving of the name Śānti to that aged shepherdess, who came with the other shepherds, is very significant and appropriate, both in the context of biblical theology, and in the framework of Indian spirituality. It reminds us both the song sung by the angels during the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:14), as well as the prayer of Indian *Rṣis* for peace as they ended every prayer only with the *śānti-mantras*. It is with these same *śānti-mantras*, *The Waste Land* of T. S. Eliot, which is considered as the most prominent poem of the twentieth century, concludes. The truth that those who enjoyed the joy of *śānti* will always be singing about it, going

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<sup>17</sup> b; lanm; ru - v>ddharu - ¼i¼ukka©¼aktanm; ru - Ì  
 b; lanu<sup>33</sup>iye k; <sup>3</sup>m; n v>ddh; divadhÀkka©u -  
 ajaku¼iyu - cilar k¼r; d¼p; na±±a©u -  
 ajap; lan; - paitalu<sup>33</sup>ikku k; <sup>4</sup>caveyp; n  
 v>k¼asyaphala - cilar pu¼pam; laka©cilar  
 pak¼ikku<sup>22</sup>u±±a©cila koccupaita±±a©m¼d; l  
 iprak; ramu©¼ru k; <sup>4</sup>caka©vaccu - ko<sup>3</sup>;u  
 talprabh; karanu<sup>33</sup>ippaitale vandikkunnu (VI.21-28).



beyond the dividing walls of religion, caste, creed and nationality, is very obvious to the author of *Ātmānutāpam* too, as St Chavara could realize the striking resonance of the same ineffable mystery, which other religious experience embodies.

### 6. St Joseph as a *Muni* and *Tāpasan*

Presenting of St Joseph as a *Muni* (monk) and *Tāpasan* (ascetic) in the soil of *munis* is indeed striking! If a *muni* is someone who keeps *maunam* or silence, it is such a picture of St Joseph in fact presented in all the four Gospels.<sup>18</sup> According to the description of St Chavara, St Joseph is also one who finds happiness in his deep meditation and contemplation.

"Aware of these was St Joseph, the perfect of all (*naraṅṅājan*) born Yet propriety forbade him, trespass into the privacy"(V.101-102).<sup>19</sup> St Joseph who is never shown to be speaking in the Gospel speaks only to God and His angels. He who is the great *muni*, person of silence (*maunam*), through silence knew Jesus and His salvific works and communicated the same to us. The teaching of *Bṛhadāraṇya Upaniṣad*, that "to know Brahman one should know the importance of silence" (3.5.1) can be aptly ascribed to the life of St Joseph. Perhaps, we can compare him to the great *Muni* of *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* named Bādḥvan, as it is explained by Śāṅkara. It is through his silence that sage Bādḥvan explained about Brahman, when the disciple called Bāṣkali approached him to get the knowledge about God. As Bāṣkali continued with his questions, Guru answered, "Don't you understand that this soul is silence." St Joseph, one who always speaks the great language of silence in all the pages of the Gospels, is indeed a true *Muni* with all its traits. It may be because of this same reason that St Chavara and his companions might have given the name of this great *muni* and *tāpasan* (sage) for the first *Tapasu Bhavan* (house of sages), which they started at Mannanam, in

<sup>18</sup> *kḷapanj - pitj ven°e ʒara³a - "yÅse" muni*  
*kḷamayj | p j rttunpukku - sutane bahusnEhattj | (II.238-240).*

<sup>19</sup> *naraṅṅājanj - pitj yausEppu dhyj nattinj |*  
*varasantpḷattmu k j ³unnuvennj kilu - (V.101-102).*





thus Vedas are also called as *Śruti* St Chavara uses the term '*Śravaṇam*'<sup>24</sup> to indicate Gospel, in *Ātmānutāpam* III.83-84.

### 9. *Kaliyugam*

According to Hindu tradition a *yuga* is having four periods i.e., *satyayugam*, *tretayugam*, *dvāparayugam*, and *kaliyugam*. At present the humanity is undergoing through the last one namely through the *kaliyugam*. In fact, it is a dark age of moral decline, in which humanity keeps indifferent to God. St Chavara is relating it with the teachings of Jesus to present that during his life time, Jesus has given warnings about the imminent final judgement, against the evils of humanity:

And besides, His just laws to maintain  
Ages back, a warning message He sent  
But men on earth with burning passions rife  
His Will defied and were with fire destroyed! (VI.57-60)<sup>25</sup>

St Chavara retains the information that even then, man just ignored this warning of Jesus and immersed in diverse immoral activities and disregarded Him.

### 10. Attitude of the Church to Inculturation and Dialogue

We need to analyse the above mentioned interfaith initiatives of St Chavara in the context of pre-Vatican attitude of the Church, which considered other religions as pagans and their religious practices as mere superstitions. For example, see the statement of Pope Pius XI: "One of the greatest and most wonderful signs of love for one's neighbour is when, by our loving care, the pagans are led out of their murky superstitions and are filled with the true faith in Christ."<sup>26</sup> According to Pope Benedict XV,

<sup>24</sup> *muppati<sup>oo</sup>; 3;u3rava<sup>3a</sup> - pa;hippicca  
tatparan malp; ne k; 3; kE<sup>3a</sup> -* (III.83-84)

<sup>25</sup> *ennu tanneyumalla, tan<sup>o</sup>e nṣṭiye p; rpp; nā  
munnamE kaliyuga - tannila±±a<sup>o</sup>iyiccu.  
pinneyu - mannil narar k; mamḥ; gniva<sup>3/4</sup>; l  
tanne nindicca hEtuvagniy; l dahippiccu* (VI.57-58).

<sup>26</sup>Walbert Buhlmann, *All Have The Same God: An Encounter with the Peoples and Religions of Asia*, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1979, 27.

An enormous number of souls must be saved from the proud tyranny of Satan and be brought to the freedom of the children of God. ... in their misunderstanding many people are still very far away from the true faith ... What type of people needs brotherly love more than the non-believers who do not know God at all?”<sup>27</sup>

And as the faithful sons of the Church, it is with such an attitude the Christian missionaries came to India, which was questioned by Mahatma Gandhi:

We were described as a land of superstitious pagans who knew nothing about God and who denied God. ... I am convinced that to say that is a denial of the Spirit of Christ. ... What you find difficult is that you look upon other religions to be wrong or you mar them to such an extent that they equal falsity. You shut your eyes before the truth which shines in the other religions and which give its believers true joy and peace. Therefore, I did not hesitate to recommend to my Christian friends a study of the other holy scriptures of the world, along with prayer and sympathy. From my own experience, I can say that a study like this enabled me to pay tribute to them as well as to my own religion. It has enriched my personal faith and has broadened my horizons.<sup>28</sup>

On the contrary, Vatican II by its path breaking shifts opened the doors and windows of the Church to other religious traditions and dispelled the wrong notions about them. But, even before this great Council corrected the age old negative views of the Church on other religions, St Chavara as a prophet of inter-faith harmony, initiated daring steps in the Indian Church. Much before the Council teachings, he could break out of the sphere of an isolated religious sect. The starting of a Sanskrit School and learning the Sanskrit symbolizes his commitment to preserve authentic Indian ancient culture, tradition and heritage. Sanskrit learning provided St Chavara a gateway to understand Hindu culture, the way of life and

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<sup>27</sup>Buhlmann, *All Have The Same God*, 26-27.

<sup>28</sup>Buhlmann, *All Have The Same God*, 24-25.

thought that helped him promote interfaith dialogue and intercultural relations. He understood that Indian tradition is preserved in its sacred books which contain not merely spiritual and religious truth, but an entire outlook, the thought-patterns and accepted values of Indian society. And therefore, he knew that the Church never can be truly Indian without accepting these treasures. While discussing different approaches of interfaith, Raymond Panikkar considers that “neither utilization nor interpretation is the best category to apply to ‘religious encounter’ nor ‘development of religion’ but it is the category of growth.”<sup>29</sup> And, in his encounter with other religions, I would say, St Chavara followed this category of growth in a unique way and the Infancy Narrative of *Ātmānutāpam*, is a poetic testimony of it!

## 11. Conclusion

The realization of the great dream of ‘*tapasu bhavanam*’ and giving of the title *Ātmānutāpam* for the epic poem that he has written at the end of his life are the flowering forms of the habit of *tapas*, which St. Chavara always cherished in his life. The title *Ātmānutāpam* is actually a component of three words, i.e., *ātma+anu+tāpam*, and here the verbal word ‘*tāpam*’ is derived from the root √*tap*, which originally means ‘to burn’ and in this context, it may be interpreted as ‘compunction’ or ‘repentance.’ St Chavara who has been instrumental in instituting first two living Indian indigenous religious congregations, i.e., Carmelites of Mary Immaculate and Congregation of Mother of Carmel, by which he actually inculturated Christian traditions of religious life and vice versa foreseeing the farsightedness of a prophet:

Religious institutes, working to plant the Church, and thoroughly imbued with mystic treasures with which the Church’s religious tradition is adorned, should strive to give expression to them and to hand them on, according to the

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<sup>29</sup>Mathias Mundadan, “Inter-faith Approaches: A Survey of Contemporary Indian Christian Literature” in *Meeting of Religions: New Orientations and Perspectives* by Aykara Thomas, ed., Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1978.

nature and the genius of each nation. Let them reflect attentively on how Christian religious life might be able to assimilate the ascetic and contemplative traditions, whose seeds were sometimes planted by God in ancient cultures already prior to the preaching of the Gospel (*Ad Gentes*, 18.40).

St Chavara anticipated the teachings of Vatican Council II in the nineteenth century itself, and implemented it rewardingly in the Indian context. St Chavara and the first fathers chose inculturation of religious life as a vehicle to "give the living water in Indian cups," which is very much rooted in *sanyāsa* traditions of *R̥ṣis*. Therefore, for St Chavara and his companions indianization was not merely superficial imitation of certain Hindu customs, practices or names; they never wore saffron clothes or chains of *rudrākṣa*; rather, it was much more deeper and life oriented one, as they imbibed the most prevailing values of Indian *sanyāsa* like silence (*mauna*), penance (*tapas*), vision (*darśan*) of God, as per the Council instructions. Seeing India as the cradle of *sanyāsa*, St Chavara and his companions opted *sanyāsa* as the primary medium of inculturation. Even when St Chavara became a priest, his only dream was to start a '*tapas-bhavan*' for embracing the religious life, which was the intention of his 'First Holy Mass.' And in his death bed, when St Chavara was unable to do any other forms of penance, as he was very much weak in his body, his determination to complete the epic poem *Ātmānutāpam*, which required a lot of *tapasya* itself can be considered as an act of '*tapas*,' as it is clarified in his own words:

To turn an ascetic, I lack the needed strength  
 I can muse upon your sacred passion  
 And seek my hope in your precious blood  
 All else is beyond my power, my Lord! (VII.365-370)

Thus, by composing *Ātmānutāpam*, as a *tāpasa* (an ascetic), St Chavara has continued his great *tapas* even in the sick bed. In each line of *Ātmānutāpam*, his contrite soul is burning (*tap*) with divine love, as he reflects on the life story of Jesus' redemption of the humanity, as well as, lamenting on his own sins. Therefore, *Ātmānutāpam* should not be viewed as a mere poetic work, rather it is the essence of his own *tāpasa* life (ascetic way of life).